

NOMAD LAND

IN KYRGYZSTAN'S FORMIDABLE TIAN SHAN MOUNTAINS LIES THE SARYCHAT-EERTASH NATURE RESERVE, A PLACE OF DEEP VALLEYS AND WILD RIVERS COURSING BELOW 6,000-METRE PEAKS. EXISTENCE IN THIS REMOTE CORNER OF THE COUNTRY CAN BE INCREDIBLY HARSH. AT FIRST GLANCE, IT SEEMS DEVOID OF LIFE, BUT ANYONE WHO VENTURES HERE DISCOVERS A BEAUTIFUL AND DYNAMIC LAND, HOME TO RARE, ENIGMATIC SNOW LEOPARDS AND OTHER WILDLIFE THAT HIDES DEEP IN THE CREVICES

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS: DANIEL ALFORD







Kyrgyzstan's landscapes are incredibly diverse and seem timeless. The capital Bishkek sits on the central Eurasian steppe, a vast grassland stretching from the east of Ukraine to Mongolia. Yurts have been used by nomads on the steppe for thousands of years. Packable, warm and sturdy, they are still used today, offering a perfect shelter in tough conditions. Ancient nomadic horse cultures thrived here, and you can still see it today — horses are a hugely important part of life. Looking out of your car window as you travel, you may spot a game of *kok boru*, a traditional competition in which two teams on horseback try to manoeuvre a goat carcass into the opposing team's goal. Although the goat is replaced by a mould these days, it takes nothing away from the excitement and spectacle.





It takes a drive of two days, one of them off road, climbing 4,000m above sea level, to reach the Sarychat-Eertash Nature Reserve. Established in 1995, it covers more than 500sq miles and was founded to protect its diverse and endangered species, namely the ghostly snow leopard and the argali, the largest species of wild sheep in the world. Bears, wolves and the grumpy-looking Pallas cat also roam here. Conservationists and local people work hard to study and protect the wildlife. Rangers like Omurbek Kurmanaliev and his team swap their 4WD for semi-wild horses to journey deeper into glacial valleys, stopping at old hunting cabins and often sleeping outside.







To aid the conservation effort, locals like Elaman Omurbekov are employed as rangers by the Snow Leopard Foundation, Kyrgyzstan, which works in coordination with the international Snow Leopard Trust. Their local knowledge and their expertise in the high mountains are essential. Many of the rangers used to be herders and hunters, but now they use their skills and experience in the harsh environment to help scientists and filmmakers. The former leave camera traps to monitor wildlife. Triggered automatically by infrared sensors, they can be left for months at a time, providing a unique insight into the secret lives of the animals here.





In recent years, Kyrgyzstan has emerged as a leader in snow leopard conservation, with up to 500 animals estimated to be living in the country, in an area covering 40,540sq miles. Filmmaker, director and co-founder of the Wild Expeditions adventure tour group, Chris Beard works with the Snow Leopard Trust to catalogue sightings and to raise awareness for the reserve, to help ensure its protection. The semi-wild horses the team uses are essential for covering the vast and challenging terrain they work in. The horses are tough and sure-footed, traversing steep paths and frozen rivers with ease. Riding horses here is the ultimate way to experience this wild, savagely beautiful land, transporting the visitor back to the time of the nomads. ▣